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Dialogic collaging to cultivate shame resilience in writing classrooms

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Abstract

Purpose – Recently, practitioner literature in English education has taken up the issue of writing-related shame in classrooms, calling for teachers to help students develop resilience. One possible approach for nurturing shame resilience around writing is dialogic collaging: students make and dialogically engage with collages and with colleagues to explore the self-as-writer and to connect with others around writing struggles and joys. The purpose of this paper is to share and critically reflecting on this pedagogical approach.

Design/methodology/approach – To share, interpret and consider the limitations and implications of the dialogic collaging pedagogy in service of writing-related shame resilience, the authors offer a multi-voiced narrative about one classroom instantiation of college, from the perspective of a university writing teacher and a student of writing.

Findings – On the interpretation, this story unfolds three central themes as follows: dialogic collaging can help students to develop a more realistic and situated sense of self-as-writer. That is, students can come to appreciate how "becoming a writer" is a process they – and others around them – are already in, rather than an unreachable achievement at which they will inevitably fail. The stance of playfulness nurtured through the dialogic collage process can provide a helpful distance between self and writing. These processes may – under certain conditions – support shame resilience.

Research limitations/implications – The conclusion reflects on whether more explicit attention to shame could be fruitful and on the dynamics of teacher vulnerability in writing classrooms.

Practical implications – The authors hope to inspire writing teachers – particularly in secondary, post-secondary and adult education – to engage with dialogic collaging as part of their pedagogical repertoires.

Originality/value – Dialogic collaging is a pedagogical approach not previously discussed in the literature on secondary and post-secondary writing instruction, offering one promising way to address writing-related shame. It can make visible and build solidarity around how others are also in the midst of a process of becoming – as writers and/or with writing. This appreciation can help nurture a more realistic, playful and shame-resilient stance toward self-as-writer.

Keywords Shame, Teacher education, Pedagogy, Play, Dialogic teaching, Collage, Shame resilience, Writing identity, Writing instruction

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In a recent essay, Whitney (2018) invites writing teachers to address the shame often surrounding experiences of writing in classrooms and schools. Grounded in the work of Brown (2012) and others, writing-related shame is conceptualized as an identity threat, a global feeling of worthlessness in response to a specific struggle or failure with writing

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(Whitney, p. 130). Brown (2012) usefully differentiates shame as a global experience of unworthiness (e.g. "I am shit") as distinct from a specific writing struggle a writer may be having: "this is a shitty first draft" (Lamott, 1994) or experience of guilt: "that was a shitty thing I did to my friend, sending such a mean text to her." Because shame is the price humans must pay for letting themselves be seen (or in the case of writing, "read") by others, Brown (2012) suggests that becoming comfortable with the inherent vulnerability of our humanity is key to shame resilience.

Whitney's essay suggests three specific strategies for writing teachers to facilitate shame resilience. First, she advises helping writers know what shame is and to recognize when they find themselves in it. Secondly, she advocates self-compassion – teaching writers to respond to their own work and to their perceived failures kindly and gently (Neff *et al.*, 2005). Finally, she supports leading students to find the "delicate" balance between being healthily separated from their writing, yet also deeply invested in it. To do this work, Whitney contends, writing teachers need to honor *struggle* as part of what it means to be a writer and to practice writing. To move through shame, moreover, Whitney suggests the importance of connecting with others in solidarity around the inherent difficulties of writing.

To honor and facilitate solidarity around the struggles of writing, it seems that it would first be helpful to identify and explore one's own vulnerability, for example, through some form of inner work or dialogue with the self (e.g. contemplation, self-exploration and self-compassion). With that groundwork laid, connection with others around shame experiences surrounding writing might be forged. Doing such inner work – dialoguing with the self, sharing vulnerabilities with others – can indeed feel challenging in bureaucratic institutional spaces such as the contemporary university or the twenty-first-century public school, ruled as these spaces are by discourses of productivity, efficiency and standardization.

Given these challenging educational circumstances, how can contemporary writing teachers nurture environments that facilitate self-exploration and connection for writers, in service of shame resilience? This narrative offers ongoing dialogic engagement with *collage* as one possible answer to this question.

Situating the pedagogical approach

The dialogic collage work narrated here evolved in response to two pedagogical traditions in the field of English education, namely, expressivist writing instruction and dialogic writing theory.

From the 1970s onward, expressivists encouraged student writers to free themselves from their inner critic (Murray, 1999) and from the oppressive, critical gaze of the teacher (Elbow, 1973). The expressivist turn in the field re-framed writing as a natural developmental process that individuals would inevitably develop, given the freedom of time within an open writing curriculum such as writing workshop and given tools that writers keep about them such as a writer's daybook (Murray, 1999), a stack of note cards (Lamott, 1994) or self-generated lists of topics. Much of the classroom writing advocated and modeled by expressivists was personal in content and narrative or poetic in its form.

In the 1980s, this expressivist approach was roundly critiqued by scholars such as Delpit (1986), Hillocks (1986) and others, in favor of a more "structured process" (Applebee, 1989) approach, that is now – at least in the USA – commonly taught in a popular secondary English teacher preparation textbook (Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2010) and in teacher preparation programs around the country (Pasternak *et al.*, 2017). This approach emphasizes learning informal reasoning and critical thinking through collaborative inquiry (Hillocks, 2011). Yet, this approach fizzles in addressing some of the deeply rooted emotional obstacles – such as shame – facing writers in contemporary classrooms.

What seems to be needed, to respond to writing-related shame, is an approach to writing instruction that draws on some of the emotional wisdom of the expressivist tradition (i.e. the need to express or dialogue with, the self), but further situates the focus on the self within a broader dialogic framework that expressivist approaches lacked (i.e. situating the self in relation to other individuals and to other spheres of communication). Dialogic or "conversational entry" approaches frame writing as entering into conversations with others – much like turn-taking in the talk, where interlocutors listen to what others have to say, respond with their own ideas and await the response of those with whom they are in conversation (Graff and Birkenstein, 2018; Juzwik *et al.*, 2018; VanDerHeide and Juzwik, 2018). From this perspective, writing is a "move" people make, a form of action people take, that can productively be conceptualized as functionally equivalent to talking and many other kinds of semiotic activity (Prior and Hengst, 2010) such as bodily movement (Hengst, 2010); artistic expression (e.g. drawing, painting and sculpting) (Chisholm and Olinger, 2017); and hair, apparel, tattoos and other personal stylistics (Kirkland, 2009). Oftentimes, maybe even *usually*, writing works alongside other forms of semiotic activity to accomplish social (inter) action. Within this dialogic framing of writing, writers' tools become devices or materials that facilitate writers *entering into a conversation* in some way, with self or others.

In the story that unfolds here, collages became tools for dialoguing with the writerly self and for connecting with others around the struggles and joys of writing. Inspiring this work was Frost's (2010) Jungian dialogic collage approach developed for psychotherapy and social work, and widely used for spiritual development and prayer, namely, individuals create small, rather simple collage cards, each one representing some focal energy, that is a facet of the collage maker's personhood. A key idea shaping the collage-making process, as Frost (2010) explains, it is *intuition*, namely, in creating collages, makers let themselves be guided by their intuition, opening themselves to images that call to them in some powerful way. Oftentimes, these images and collages can be mysterious, even to their creator – evoking ambivalence and ambiguity. Over time, individuals may create a deck of cards that embody the multitudinous, ever-changing voices of the self[1].

Collage makers then engage in interior dialogues with their collages, imagining each collage as an inner voice, representing a part of themselves, with which they can enter into dialogues over time. This dialoguing with the self is a key part of Frost's collaging process. Initially, it involves asking guided questions of the collage, posed in the second person. Other open-ended questioning and exploring can follow. Exploratory writing drives this process of dialoguing with collages over time, as collage makers write out these dialogues with their collages in two voices (questioner and respondent). For this reason, dialogic collage work resonates with many of the sensibilities of expressivist writing teachers and scholars, described above.

Yet, the collage work goes beyond merely dialoguing with the self, for sharing collages *to connect with others* is also central to the method Frost (2010) developed. Often collage making is done in groups and organized around partner work. For example, partners may help facilitate the dialogue with the collages by posing questions or sharing observations and in this way, sharing can extend and deepen individuals' engagement with their own collages. However, sharing and at times *collaboratively interpreting* collages with one another in a group setting can also become a way to connect with others around shared human experiences. In this way, collaging holds the potential to function as a dialogic tool – "an activity, heuristic, assemblage, guide or another mechanism a teacher uses in planning and practice that helps scaffold students into talking to learn" (Juzwik *et al.*, 2013, p. 35) – for framing and stimulating writing as entry into a conversation with the self and with others.

Setting the scene: the institutional space

Mary has, therefore, been exploring such dialogic collage work as a way to address student struggles with writing-related shame and other difficult emotions in her postsecondary writing classrooms in the midwestern US. Although she has used the approach in a range of writing classrooms, workshops and faculty development settings, the story told here unfolded in a 400-level course offered in the English department at a large public university in the midwestern US. Many, but not all, students who typically enroll in the course are prospective secondary English teachers in their fourth year of a five-year teacher preparation program that culminates in a year-long unpaid teaching internship. The course aims to equip students with direct experiences with and knowledge about writing and its instruction in secondary classrooms.

The course curriculum centers the experiences of enrolled students, as writers themselves (a copy of the course syllabus is available upon request – please contact Mary at mmjuzwik@msu.edu). One of the four goals of the course is to “develop a deeper understanding of ourselves and our working processes as writers” (Juzwik, 2018, p. 1). That broader developmental goal of the course, quite expressivist in conception and encompasses the focus here on dialoguing with collages. Mary introduced collage into the course as a dialogic tool for inviting her students to engage in self-compassion, inner exploration and connection with others around their writing struggles. Although paying attention to the struggle with shame was not an explicit goal or intention of the activity, it emerged as an intriguing possibility in reflecting on what students did and learned through the activity.

This paper shares a story about how this exploration unfolded in the first semester it was tried. We recognize that as many stories could be told of this unfolding series of talk, writing and semiotic activity as there were students in the class. Here we share one possible such story focused around shame resilience, as we interpret it today with ever-growing distance from that space and time. First, Mary narrates her development of collage work and dialogue as part of the course curriculum. Then, Sal, a one-time undergraduate university student enrolled in that section, shares his experience with collaging. In conclusion, we further situate this pedagogy, unfold our critical reflections about our experiences with it and meditate on further implications for collaging and writing-related shame resilience in writing teaching and teacher education.

Working with collage to dialogue with self and others: elaborating the pedagogy

Pedagogical background and rationale

Mary discovered the dialogic collage practice we will be described in a somewhat desperate attempt to connect with God and find solace during a period of personal suffering precipitated by a failing marriage. One of the central feelings she grappled with, as her marriage crumbled, was a shame – and she found in collage a way to process this and other difficult emotions. Through her own work with Frost’s (2010) dialogic process of collaging for spiritual exploration and healing during that time, she began to imagine how such imagistic exploration might help students explore and process some of the stories of shame and writing that they had been sharing with her for years. Given that these experiences of shame and writing had been well-documented in the writing research literature (Brandt, 2001), moreover, she hypothesized that collage might function as a healing and empowering practice for writers embroiled in shame and/or other difficult emotions surrounding writing.

She was particularly drawn, at first, to working on a collage with doctoral students enrolled in university writing for publication courses – where she had witnessed a great deal of struggle around issues of identity vis-a-vis writing, oftentimes grounded in storylines such as "I don't belong here, in graduate school" or "I'm not a writer" or "I'm not a GOOD writer" or "I thought I was a good writer, but now in grad school, I'm no longer hearing that validation" and so on. However, it was in the semester she worked with Sal and his colleagues that she decided to try to collage work with undergraduate students, many of who were pre-service English teachers, at the cusp of becoming secondary writing teachers themselves. She reasoned, as with any activity introduced in this class, that it might become experiential fodder for the pre-service English teachers' own future writing instructional practices.

In the semester of spring 2018, when we worked together, Mary had committed herself to write alongside students during class time, to make herself visible and somewhat vulnerable, as a writer. While this idea, "write alongside your students" was fairly standard among expressivists like Atwell (1987) and has become almost a mantra for one of the major professional development programs in writing in the USA, the national writing project, it is not something she always does. However, in this particular semester, she embraced this stance. For example, she sometimes read her writing aloud. She shared stories about her writing with students – for example, how an op-ed essay she had begun writing during a class session was rejected by the *New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and a local newspaper (It never ended up being published). She shared her joy when a paper co-authored with a colleague was accepted for publication at a journal. She did quite a bit of writing alongside students, in response to prompts she had given during workshop time in class. She also wrote most of the assignments for the course alongside them. In retrospect, it seems to us that this commitment was quite critical to how the story unfolded.

Pedagogical practice: introducing collages

The class worked with collage making and sharing during the first session, and that work continued episodically throughout the semester. On Day 1, the goal was to facilitate introductions of class members to one another as writers and human beings. I (Mary is the first-person referent in this and following sections) began by sharing some of my own collages and inviting students to write pantoum poems in response to one of these collages, an invitation elaborated in Appendix 1. I next invited students to construct two collages, as elaborated in Appendix 2, supplying five-inch by eight-inch boxboard collage cards (made from old file folders found in my department), old magazines and calendars and picture books, scissors, glue sticks and rubber cement (my preferred adhesive for collaging) and glitter. Lots of glitters. Before class, I e-mailed students and encouraged them to bring imagistic and other collage construction materials that would be more closely connected to their own life-worlds than my materials could provide.

I made one collage, rather than two, in response to my prompt, perhaps, because it took me forever to cut around all the tiny bones of the fish skeleton (Appendix 3 to examine this collage; Appendix 4 to read the pantoum poem written in dialogue with the collages). In my view, at that time, the frozen landscape and the prominent and menacing fish skeleton evoked being in the midst of a "dry spell" as a writer, while at the same time, in a really juicy spell in my love life – which is how I interpreted the two, rather than one, turtles. The title I later gave the collage, "hibernating turtles," further expresses how, at that moment, my becoming as writer interrelated with my newly emerging becoming as both lover and beloved.

Sharing collages

Members of the class then introduced ourselves to one another, as human beings and as writers, with the artifactual assistance of our collages. This is to say that our collages became the tools or prompts individuals used to introduce themselves as writers. I do not have a terribly clear memory of this particular event in January 2018, but I do recall finding Sal's writer collages laugh-out-loud funny. I remember learning that one of our colleagues was a pianist and that another came from a family with lots of siblings, all of whom were homeschooled. I found some of the collages captivating and beautiful and others boring or banal but truthfully my aesthetic responses did not matter much at all to the work they might do.

Pedagogical practice: dialoguing with collages

The following class session, I invited students into dialogue with their collages using four prompts inspired by Frost (2010):

1. Who are you?
2. What do you have to give me?
3. What do you want from me? and
4. Is there anything else you want to say to me today?" (Frost, p. 97, 125).

I furnished sentence stems to begin the responses, also suggested by Frost:

- "I am one who [. . .]";
- "What I give you is [. . .]" or "My gift to you is [. . .]"; and
- "I want you to know that [. . .]" or "I want you to remember that [. . .]" (see pp. 126-128).

Students then wrote sentences or paragraphs in response to each of these questions – I am sure the length varied dramatically from student to student. I only know about or remember Sal's writing because he ended up developing his collage response as an artifact for his final portfolio. More generally, it may be worth noting that what students wrote in dialogue with their collages was actually not for me or for my eyes – it was low-stakes exploratory writing over which students had control, very much in the expressivist spirit of Elbow (1973). The point was not so much the quality or product of the writing itself, but rather the exploration of self-as-writer in a particular moment.

This initial invitation to dialogue with and through collages was not the end of our engagement with the collages – we pulled them out from time to time across the semester and continued to see what they might have to say to us. Sometimes to open class sessions, I invited students to pull out one of their collages with a prompt to ask of it. For example, on a day we were working with argument writing, I invited students to ask their collages: "what insights about argument do you have to offer me today?" More generally, across the course, the collages made by students became voices with which they could enter into dialogue at various times over the course of the semester. One of the important concepts about dialoguing with the collages was that the wisdom offered up by the collage could (and often did) change *across time* during the semester – perhaps, a bit like reading a literary work at different points of one's life. Importantly, to our thinking, many of the invitations into such dialogue and much of the writing that emerged in response were quite playful.

For example, as shown in Appendix 6, Sal decided to revise one of his collage responses as part of his final portfolio project for the course. A playful voice dominates this writing and this becomes especially apparent when reading aloud. It is to Sal's experience we now turn, to hear his story about working with collage in the course.

Sal's story: one student's perspective on dialogic collaging

As a student, I (Sal is the first-person referent in this section) was immediately taken aback when I was asked to represent my "writing-self" in the form of a collage. I was intrigued by the idea of making a collage, but I have never been a confident writer and I was apprehensive to reflect on a part of me that I so strongly valued, yet felt so deficient in.

I can only speak for myself, but I believe my experiences as a student of writing were, for the most part ordinary. I followed suggested templates and diligently reworked my drafts according to my instructors' feedback, granting me high marks on most of my assignments in high school and college. However, still, ever, like high school, a corpus of hurtful feedback has been accumulating to make me feel increasingly insecure about myself as a writer. For the past few years, whenever I needed to be "the writer," I was only reminded of all the ways I would unquestionably fail to fit the bill. For starters, I thought my writing was incapable of concision and was always slightly off in tone. I was led to believe that I *could* produce good work (theoretically), but I could never quite produce something that was objectively well written, whatever that's supposed to mean. Feedback always seemed to come from a good place, but the slight comments I received from time to time led me to believe that *I* was in some way lacking as a writer – there was something innate in my abilities that would cause me to continue to make the same mistakes no matter how persistent I was in my work.

So, when Mary asked me to reflect on how I saw myself as a writer, I felt like I was stuck with dinner plans with an obnoxious uncle – I felt capable of making polite small talk with my writing-self, but I did not want to have any real conversation with him for fear of him looking down his nose at me. In short, I wanted out. I also talked to my classmates to see what they thought of the activity and it turns out that I was not the only one to feel anxious about this line of reflection. Two mentioned that the collage aided or "forced" us to take up this line of self-reflection, implying that they, too, were reluctant to some degree to examine themselves as writers.

Still, we all followed Mary's instructions. Luckily, I followed the specific direction to not think *too* much about how I would represent my writing-self in the collage. I simply flipped through the books and magazines until something jumped out at me.

Then, jump it did. I was flipping through an old magazine and came across this fedora-ed man standing on Coney Island beach with hiked up dress socks. I did not know why I was drawn to him, but I decided to make the collage around *him*.

In full disclosure, when the collage was all finished, I had no idea as to how this resembled myself as a writer. Another classmate, voiced a similar feeling when her collage was finished, saying that she did not "fully understand" how it represented her writing-self until she "was explaining it" to the class. For me, having something tangible in front of me made the task of reflecting on my writing-self doable; it was no longer something I wanted to actively avoid. I saw this shift as a large feat in and of itself.

However, still, at this point, I did not know what to think of my writing-self. Mary prompted my classmates and me to write from the perspective of the collage and this was helpful. It was also helpful that Mary made clear how low the stakes were – we knew this was not going to be an instance in which our commas or use of passive voice would be scrutinized. This allowed me to largely forget about composition and word choice. Looking back, I now realize that this is one of the few times I was in a classroom and wrote merely to get my thoughts on paper. In addition, this definitely showed; I was all over the place and each little bit hardly made sense on its own. When I initially skimmed disconnected phrases on my screen, I was curious to know how they represented how I say myself in terms of being a writer. Suffice to say I felt a bit doubtful about how this exercise was going.

Nevertheless, the casual feel of the exercise compelled me to stick with it and I was happy to share what I had written with a classmate. My writing-self had this to say:

> You can always count on me to bring you the thrill of a double-take; that joy of ‘is he looking at me’?! I’ll also always be here to comfort you. You may think that my exposed chest and legs speak to the contrary, but as soon as you get over that, you’ll see that the tenderness that I’ll treat you with is genuine.

He also told me that he would always be there to talk about “how children have an innate desire to hide and be found, in the centers of department store clothes racks.” Hearing these words come out of my mouth made me even more confused than I was when I had initially written them and honestly, they still confuse me a bit, but I was and still am, impressed by them, nonetheless. In addition, I do not mean to say I was impressed because I thought these lines were “good,” rather, I was impressed that I gave my writing-self a confident yet relaxed personality and – what I would consider – a killer sense of humor. I intuitively made him into someone I wanted to engage with, someone I wanted to spend time with.

I do not think I knew this at the time, but another reason I was so surprised was that I saw my writing-self *as a writer*. To me, the word writer has always been so Bronte, so Shelly – they were capital-W-“Writers.” This understanding of what it means to be a writer made it nearly impossible for me to fit “writer” anywhere in my identity. However, by putting together a representation of *my* writing-self, it completed the simple, yet important task of providing me with proof that I am, in fact, a writer in some sense of the word. “Writer” was no longer a title that was reserved for the likes of Henry James and James Baldwin – now, it looked like something that can and does, belong to everyone, in one capacity or another – mine just happened to be an old man on a beach.

When reflecting on what I have written in response to my collage, I notice that I felt free to explore without the worry of judgment. I think part of the reason I felt so uninhibited is that I was writing about something that I created – it was so clearly some object that was mine so no one could say I was writing about it incorrectly. Additionally, manifesting my emotions and self-image into something tangible added a layer between what I was writing about and what I was feeling. A classmate also suggested that the collage aided her in a similar fashion saying that the “collage was a way for me to express myself without having to put it into words, which can sometimes be difficult for me.” Ultimately, I think this way of concretizing our feelings made us a bit more comfortable to recognize, confront and share our feelings.

I fear this claim may be interpreted as hyperbolic, but I would say that it was liberating to realize that *everyone* is a writer of some sort or another. I say liberating because I am relieved to know that I am not merely someone *trying* to string together words and phrases. Now, I can look at myself more realistically – as someone, that is a writer, a writer with their own set of strengths and weaknesses, but a writer nonetheless.

Ultimately, this exercise has made me have more realistic and I think also the more compassionate view of myself as a writer – one who is not so distorted by shame. Still, I am not always comfortable while writing. There are times when I lock up, but when I think of what I learned from seeing that man on the beach, I feel I can let go, experiment and actually learn from the mistakes that we have to make in the writing process.

I still come back to this collage from time to time, even after I finished Mary’s class and I do have to say it is much easier to be comfortable with something once you’ve been able to see it in full – not hiding anything that could somehow make you feel small.

Further discussion, implications and conclusions

If Brown (2012) is right that humans experience shame as identity threat, it helps to explain the worst-case scenario so often witnessed in writing classrooms: writing-related shame leads students to dissociate the label "writer" from their identities – and from their sense of who they are becoming – altogether. Dialogic collaging can provide opportunities to reflect on how we see ourselves as writers, guiding us toward the possibility of developing resilience to feelings of shame surrounding writing. As Sal's story invokes, at the most fundamental level, it invites writers to confront how they are, in fact, already writers in some sense of the word. This vantage point – creating and responding to a visual representation of how I, as a writer specifically, see myself in a particular moment – opens up possibilities for recognizing and giving voice to difficult emotions, like shame. Working with an aesthetically crafted juxtaposition of images on a card, rather than words, can allow people to *see* one possible portrayal of themselves as writers. This imagistic focus can create space for a certain distance from the feelings – like shame – that may be evoked by the collage. Working with images offers a way to dispassionately witness one's difficult emotion, without becoming overwhelmed or caught up in the maelstrom.

This process can also help foster a more realistic understanding of our capabilities and limitations as writers. Indeed, it helps to realize an observation from Blanchot (1995) that Author 1 routinely features on the course syllabus: "you can only become a writer, you can never be one; no sooner are you, than you are no longer, a writer" (61). A more realistic assessment of self-as-lower-case-"w"-writer ultimately can help foster resilience in the face of shame and fear of failure surrounding our writing efforts.

Implications for future secondary teachers and teaching practices

So far, we have discussed how dialogic collaging can facilitate students working through feelings of writing-related shame, but our story also has implications for considering how participation in this activity could shape the future writing instruction of preservice teachers who experienced it. Sal, for his part, hopes to teach high school English in the midwestern or northeastern US upon completing his teacher certification program. In considering future practice, he believes the process of thinking about issues of shame has cultivated a capacity to be more empathetic in response to students who may have similar struggles with writing-related shame. He thinks this may make him a more compassionate and patient teacher – at the very least, motivating him to be more persistent and encouraging to students that he might otherwise have thought to be unmotivated or disinterested writers. However, interestingly, we have realized in writing the paper that writing-related shame was never explicitly discussed in the class, nor did Sal fully come to understand the significance of addressing writing-related shame through the dialogic collaging activity *alone*. Rather, his insights about the importance of writing-related shame have mostly come through the process of working together on this project.

In highlighting writing-related shame, we believe that writing-teacher-educators can design experiences and spark insights that could travel forward into educators' future practice. To assist in this end, it may well be helpful to explicitly address shame in-class discussion, in course readings and/or in an end-of-semester debrief the activity. It might be helpful to talk explicitly about the benefits of self-compassion for self-as-writer, mentioned above. In a way, this insight mirrors the critiques of expressivist writing pedagogy from the 1980s onward: while the expressive dimensions of this writing may immerse university students in a personally moving or powerful experience, this approach may not always furnish teacher candidates with the verbal labels or meta-language to productively transfer this experience to other settings such as their own future secondary classrooms. For future teachers, the immersive and dialogic experience of collaging *alone* may not equip them to work with students who do not share their own experiences with writing or with writing-related shame.

At the same time, a more exploratory, non-didactic and *playful* touch in raising such topics may be important because we would not want to see teacher candidates walking away from the experience thinking they possessed "the answer" to writing-related shame. Indeed, an invitation to play (rather than work) with images may offer a kind of mediating buffer or distancing device between one's writing and one's self. Sal found that this collaging activity rather naturally put him in a playful mood. By almost tricking him and his colleagues into being playful, collaging might have helped them put their guard down a bit, to forget about some of the reservations they may have had regarding writing.

We see great potential for play to gently beckon students away from schoolish legacies of writing correctness, from strictures of linguistic imperialism in language use and more. Sal's story and collage, captures this possibility and we think this notion of "play" in the writing classroom – particularly at the secondary and post-secondary levels – may merit further exploration and research in writing teaching and teacher education.

Qualifications and further considerations

It furthermore seems important to recognize that dialog collaging offers but one pathway for addressing writing-related shame and the story we have unfolded here is highly particularistic to one institution, one course, one instructor and a small group of students ($n = 7$). The unusually small class size may have gone a long way in creating an environment of honest self-exploration, connection and solidarity. Our story, like any story, is not meant to be generalizable so much as generative.

It seems likely that larger groups of diverse students will inevitably have a wider range of relationships with uncomfortable feelings – including shame – *vis-à-vis* writing and these different relationships may well require diverse ways of developing shame resilience. Dialogic collaging is emphatically *not* the only way. As we have discussed, dialogic collaging is *a* way to encourage students to visually portray themselves, but there may be other means of visually representing oneself that work similarly. One reason collaging worked so well in our classroom was because it was expressive and *quick* – students found materials, created a finished product, wrote about and shared their thoughts all within a two-hour class period.

Other exploratory non-cognitively-laborious tasks might equally well create space for the mind to wander, while thoughts and feelings about oneself as a writer come to a simmer. What may be important is an activity inviting playful intuitive exploration, as opposed to brooding, anxious, self-reflexive wrestling. For example, what if this activity were not limited by the time, space and material conditions of the class session? What if students were assigned to prepare a portrayal of themselves-as-writers for a later date in a medium of their choosing? Might students be compelled to experiment with different visual forms such as photography, short film making, painting, sculpting, sketching, building (e.g. with legos), process drama, etc? Non-imagistic mechanisms, as well, deserve further exploration in teacher education pedagogy aiming to engage such dialogues around shame.

Whatever the form of expression, it does seem important to invite more critical meta-reflection around how the task provides a springboard for students thinking through writing-related shame in their own writing practice and future writing pedagogy. For example, future teachers might be invited to debrief:

- how, if at all, they have dealt with writing-related shame through dialoguing with their collages (e.g. "how did this dialogic collaging process work (or not work) for *you*?");
- how others, including future students, might experience and respond to writing-related shame (e.g. "does your experience sound similar to your classmates, or did you have a different experience?"); and
- various possible ways to nurture resilience to shame and other difficult emotions in writing instruction (e.g. "if this activity did not speak to you, can you think of something else that might be more effective in helping you recognize writing-related shame and cultivate shame resilience?)."

The potential limitations of the dialogic collaging pedagogy aside, we do see one theme emerging in the narrative that may slightly re-frame the widespread (at least in the USA) expressivist idea that *teachers write alongside our students and share about themselves*. First, when composing (writing or collages or whatever) alongside students, the teacher has an opportunity to make herself vulnerable – to articulate her own struggles or difficult emotions as a writer, to let herself be seen as a "small-w" writer, ever in the process. This kind of vulnerability requires honesty, both with the self and with students.

Some teacher educators may strategically *choose* not to make their vulnerabilities visible to students, for any number of reasons. For her part, Mary does not believe she could have engaged this approach with the same level of vulnerability 5 or 10 years earlier, in no small part because she was so caught up in the academic achievement game of attempting to project an ethos of *in*vulnerability. Others may choose not to make vulnerabilities visible to students because of the tax they pay because of racialized, gendered and other hierarchies of the academy (Baker Bell, 2017). Intense personal struggles such as contending with a terminal illness, grieving a death, going through a divorce or recovering from a sexual assault could also lead teacher educators *not* to make their vulnerability visible in the classroom.

Keeping these caveats in mind, our story suggests that when teachers do choose to write alongside students, within a stance of vulnerability, they can enact a kind of existential equality that makes an ethos of solidarity possible (Ranciere, 1991) – the sharing of writing struggles, the notion that "we are all in this together," the stance that we are all becoming writers with a lower-case-"w."

Note

1. Some compare these decks to tarot cards (Frost, 2010, p. 103), and the physical process of dialogically working with collages is similar. Making and dialoguing with collage cards differs from tarot practices, however, in that the cards are interpreted by their makers, sometimes in collaboration with others.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1. Pantoum poetry writing

(1) Closely observe the collage, drink it in, enter into it, give it your fullest attention. What details do you notice? Who or what is/are (s) the collage depicting? What colors do you see? What images are evoked? What is the overall feeling of the collage, for you? What questions does the collage lead you to ask?

(2) Now, jot down some of what you notice about the collage in eight distinct phrases:

- The phrases can be any length;
- After writing each phrase, start a new line;
- After you have eight phrases, read back through them and feel free to revise or rework as you go; and
- Play with different possibilities for ordering the lines. "Then organize them into an eight-line sequence", in *a way that you fancy, and label each line to show your preferred order: A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H.*

Shape a pantoum poem from this material, using the form [in Appendix 5].

Appendix 2. Collage making invitation

I invite you to create two smallish collages today, each 5 × 8 inches.

- The first collage evokes you as a writer, today; and
- The second collage evokes your "inner critic," today.

Here are some guidelines for the collages:

- Try to work intuitively and playfully;
- Intuitively select images that call to you (do not over-think this selection process);
- Keep the collages as simple as possible;
- When you cut out images, cut out very precisely and closely around figures;
- Intuitively arrange images or other materials to form your collages;
- Try to fill the entire space (some material may be background, others may be more in the foreground);
- Avoid using text/words on the collage – image only; and
- There is no such thing as a "wrong" collage!

Appendix 3

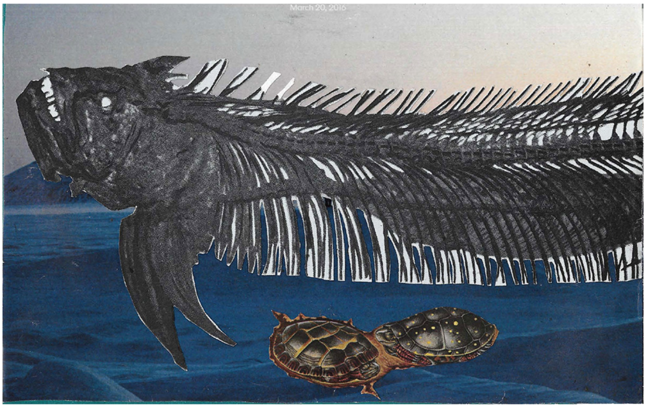

Figure A1.
Mary's "hibernating turtles" collage

Appendix 4. Hibernating turtles

Hibernating turtles;
Keeping warm;
Under the frozen tundra earth; and
Sleep still as death.
Keeping warm;
Skeleton mouth menacingly upturned;
Sleep still as death; and
Bristly prickling spine.
Skeleton mouth menacingly upturned;
Empty eyes;
Bristly prickling spine; and
Staring vaguely heavenward.
Empty eyes;
Under the frozen tundra earth;
Staring vaguely heavenward; and
Hibernating turtles.

Appendix 5. Pantoum form

(1) Stanza 1:
  - A
  - B
  - C
  - D

(2) Stanza 2:
  - B
  - E
  - D

  - F
3. Stanza 3:
  - E
  - G
  - F
  - H
4. Stanza 4:
5. G
6. C (or A)
7. H
8. A (or C)

Appendix 6. "The voice of my creative-self: an exploratory piece by Sal antonucci"

Well, hello there; I bet you did not think you would ever see me. It seems to me that you have been trying your hardest to stay away from the thought of me. It is like you are trying to deny my existence. Why is that? Do you think I am not good enough? You are always saying that there is no good and bad, only differences – only interesting bits. If you really do think so, then why are you afraid of studying me?

I suppose that does not matter anymore given that you have, finally, placed a face to my figure. Now, that you can see me, I want you to look at me and listen to my story.

I am the one who buys you an ice cream cone, drops it in the sand, stares at you sternly, and then buys you another one. Wherever I am, you will know I am there for a reason even though you will never know what that exact reason is. I am the guy that will walk across a sea of air and not tell anyone about it – in fact, I will be sure it is done in secret. Even so, I can not ever see when the slightest glare enters my eyes; these eyes are as sensitive as they look, I suppose.

You can always count on me to bring you the thrill of a double-take; that joy of "is he looking at me?"! I will also always be here to comfort you. You may think that my exposed chest and legs speak to the contrary, but as soon as you get over that, you will see that the tenderness that I will treat you with is genuine.

I want you to know that I will continue to stare at you when you look away. I also want you to know that I never stare to hurt you. I want you to come back to me every day to see that I am not kidding.

Finally, if there is one thing you remember from me it is this: nothing really matters, so appreciate it. There will be a day when you will no longer have the opportunity to meet with me to talk. We would not be able to speak about how it would feel to be a squirrel roaming a thicket in your backyard garden; how sad your freshman year roommate looked in his sleep with his masculine-mask "placed in a jar" on his nightstand; how children have an innate desire to hide and be found, in the centers of department store clothes racks. Understand that you are only present for so long and even if you would not talk to me, you will at least let me continue to watch over you.

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